



Preserving America's Heritage

THE NATIONAL HISTORIC PRESERVATION PROGRAM AT 50: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Fifty years after enactment of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (NHPA), many of the major issues that drove the creation of the NHPA—energy, education, community revitalization—still resonate. The program has matured and can count many successes:

- More than 90,000 places worthy of preservation have been listed on the National Register of Historic Places.
- Federal historic preservation tax credits have stimulated nearly \$120 billion in private investment in the rehabilitation of historic properties.
- Nearly 125,000 federal actions are reviewed each year for their impact on historic properties.
- Federal agencies have programs and policies in place that promote stewardship of historic properties.
- Tribal, state, and local governments partner with the federal government to extend the national preservation program into virtually every American community.

Despite these accomplishments, there are promises and a vision of the NHPA that remain unfulfilled, and preservation continues to face the challenges of a growing and diversifying nation.

A Look at the Future

The United States of 2016 is a vastly different nation than in 1966, and the challenges society faces today have likewise changed. Dr. Richard Wagner, director of the Goucher College historic preservation program, suggests that the NHPA and its policies and programs were largely shaped by five “drivers:” demographics, the natural environment, technology, economics, and the education environment of mid-20th century America. He notes that significant changes in those drivers will occur over the next 50 years, which will have a significant effect on the needs of the national historic preservation program. A look at these drivers provides some broader context for assessing the program needs for the future:

Demographics. U.S. population will grow by 25 percent and will be older and more diverse, with minorities becoming the majority and population growth driven largely by immigration.

Environment. Global climate change will bring sea level rise, increased storm intensity, and drought cycles.

Technology. Information and communication technology will become increasingly more accessible and powerful while technological advancement will occur in everything from materials technology to biotechnology.

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Economics. Economic growth will slow in developed countries, due to shrinking populations and competition from current emerging nations, and will need new sources of stimulus.

Education. Higher education will be increasingly dependent on technology, traditional lectures and seminars will disappear, large research universities will dominate the educational landscape, continuing and specialized education will be lifelong activities due to the rapid changes in technology and the economy, and college costs and return on investment for academic disciplines will increasingly drive students' selections of majors.

Another emerging view in the preservation community is that the focus since 1966 has been on physical resources and their preservation, with insufficient attention to the cultural values and traditions—the “intangible” aspects of heritage—associated with properties. The “why” of preservation matters just as much as the “what” and the “how.”

Finally, there continue to be activities carried out or supported by the federal government that threaten the nation's historic resources in much the same way that federal urban renewal and highway construction programs did 50 years ago:

Energy development and transmission. Large-scale traditional and renewable energy projects are impacting cultural landscapes, traditional cultural sites, and archaeological resources in a massive way.

Infrastructure development. Rail and highway construction, harbor development, bridge replacement, and broadband build-out are posing preservation challenges.

Urban change and redevelopment. Economic and demographic shifts have left communities with abandoned properties, excess infrastructure, and insufficient financial resources to maintain services and facilities, threatening historic properties and neighborhoods in both large cities and small towns.

Sprawl and suburbanization. Similarly, many regions of the U.S. have experienced extensive suburban and exurban sprawl, transforming rural landscapes and communities.

Reducing the federal footprint. Changes in government priorities and the methods of delivering public services leave historic federal properties without a current use and ripe for demolition or sale.

Funding historic preservation. Chronic underfunding of the governmental structure for preservation impacts the delivery of needed services to stakeholders, and repeated calls for comprehensive tax reform threaten the continuation of highly successful federal tax credits.

Acknowledging this landscape, the membership of the ACHP has begun to analyze and discuss the challenges and the opportunities confronting the national historic preservation program at 50. Recognizing the NHPA has produced a comprehensive national program with a variety of highly evolved tools and techniques to advance historic preservation goals, the task today is not to invent a completely new system, as the NHPA did in 1966. Instead, the need is to identify innovations that build on the NHPA foundations and to refine and adjust the tools currently in use, rethinking their application, to meet current and future demands. The following framework is offered as the basis for a dialogue on developing public policy recommendations to do just that.

Challenges

Developing public and political support. There is a general lack of widespread public understanding of and appreciation for the importance of historic preservation to contemporary America. In particular, the economic and environmental benefits of preservation are insufficiently documented, measured, and

explained. Building an appreciation for history, culture, and preservation among young people is a critical part of this challenge.

Obtaining adequate and sustainable financial support. Failure to provide the full amount of funding authorized in the Historic Preservation Fund hampers the effectiveness of the tools provided in the NHPA. Uncertainty about the continuation of federal historic preservation tax credits undermines public-private partnerships that are increasingly important for preservation.

Providing leadership and expertise. The national preservation program needs forceful and consistent leadership at the policy level in the federal government to advance preservation as a national policy and priority. At the professional level, there are insufficient numbers and types of qualified and experienced practitioners (in both public and private sectors) in the various preservation fields, and succession planning is needed to address an aging workforce.

Promoting inclusiveness. The changing face of America needs to be better reflected in the resources recognized as historic and in the professional preservation community. A more expansive approach to significance is needed, and diverse communities must be more effectively engaged and supported in preserving their own heritage and telling their part of the American story.

Recognizing the full range of the nation's heritage. In addition to acknowledging the heritage of the many diverse groups that will increasingly comprise the American public, the preservation program needs to incorporate concepts of intangible heritage and non-traditional resources, such as cultural landscapes and sites sacred to native peoples. New tools, skills, and standards will be required to do this.

Improving preservation processes and systems. Current criteria for evaluating historic significance and legal protective mechanisms need to be updated to reflect the values communities place on their heritage and to elevate outcomes over process. Complexity and over-reliance on professional expertise stifle public engagement and impede the preservation of what citizens really value.

Respecting the views and concerns of indigenous peoples. While the NHPA provides for formal participation of Indian tribes and Native Hawaiian organizations, in practice they are often overlooked or excluded. The result is that the resources they value are not properly recognized or considered in the mandated preservation processes.

Opportunities

Democratizing preservation. Social media, technology, and an expanding perception of historic significance can open the preservation program more broadly to the public. Community engagement in deciding what is important and how it should be managed can strengthen public and political support and promote diversity throughout the program.

Celebrating diversity. Emerging recognition of the diversity of the American story offers the opportunity to engage a broader public in all aspects of the national historic preservation program. This in turn can expand the inventory of recognized historic properties and better inform decisions about their preservation and use, supplementing the work done by preservation experts.

Furthering collaboration. Increasing recognition of the contributions historic preservation can make to economic development and quality of life can foster greater public-private partnerships that benefit preservation. Focusing on collaborative solutions can redirect regulatory review processes constructively and better reflect federal agency mission needs and program goals.

Supporting sustainability. Pioneering work done on the environmental benefits of historic preservation demonstrates its value as a tool for sustainable development and addressing the challenges of climate change adaptation and resilience.

Enhancing appreciation for heritage through education. Integrating cultural heritage awareness into education systems can build a better understanding among young Americans of the importance of history and historic preservation. Targeted youth conservation and service learning programs along with expanded professional and vocational training can lead to careers in preservation and broaden participation in the field.

Rethinking established preservation processes and systems. Based on furthering the goals of inclusiveness and civic engagement, a fresh look at the procedures and criteria that guide the recognition, protection, and enhancement of historic properties offers opportunities for achieving greater transparency, stakeholder and public participation, and efficiency. Such a re-examination could also promote better integration of preservation systems with other environmental and social impact processes and spur innovative thinking for new tools and techniques, especially the application of technology.

Do you agree with these observations? Do you see other challenges and opportunities that should be addressed? Are there some issues or potential strategies that you disagree with or think should be recast? What are your ideas for the future of the program? Do you see a need for changes in legislation, regulations and procedures, or administrative policies and standards?

Please send your comments and suggestions by March 1, 2016 to NHPA50@achp.gov.